DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 028 828 PS 001 720

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Literature and the Young Child.
New Jersey State Dept. of Education, Trenton.
Pub Date Mar 67
Note-13p.
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.75
Descriptors-Childhood Interests, Creative Activities, Creative Writing, *Early Childhood Education, Interpersonal Relationship, *Literature, *Literature Guides, Poetry, Prose, Reading Centers, *Selection, Self Concept, Story Reading, Story Telling

The values, selection, and presentation of literature for young children are described in this pamphlet. The values discussed are educational importance and self-concept and interpersonal relationship development. The selection criteria include defining a good book, identifying types of literature which appeal to children, and noting the level, content, language, and reality of a book. A note is made of what assistance is available in selecting children's literature. In the section describing presentation, techniques are listed for both telling and reading a story. Suggestions are made for designing a reading center. Additional ways of stimulating interest in literature are listed. Finally, many suggestions are given for helping children to create their own stories. A short bibliography is included. (JS)

ED028828

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
225 WEST STATE STREET
TRENTON 08625

LITERATURE AND THE YOUNG CHILD

PS001720

Division of
Curriculum and Instruction

Office of
Elementary Education

March, 1967

Material Prepared

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LITERATURE AND THE YOUNG CHILD

"I have in these years learned a great deal about the minds and imaginations of the young. I know that, if they have been nurtured and nourished by an early love of books, they have far finer and more sensitive minds and imaginations."

-- Mary Ellen Chase

"Recipe for a Magic Childhood"

Values of Literature

Children's literature has a very important place in educational programs for the young. Love for books, stories and poetry develops through repeated exposure to books and daily opportunities to hear stories read or told, and to choose, handle and look at books for oneself.

It is noteworthy that early and frequent contact with books helps develop future motivation to read and seems to make the learning of reading an easier process. Just as significant are the pleasure, stimulation and enrichment that literary experiences bring into the child's present life.

A book that draws upon the child's own background of experience is something like a magnifying glass as it focuses on and enlarges one aspect from among the multitude of experiences in which the child is involved. Thus, carefully selected books can deepen and enlarge a child's perception and understanding of himself and of what he sees and hears in the world around him. They enable him to relive an experience, to think about familiar situations in a new way, and provide him with words to describe what he thinks and feels regarding them.

Books may also be the vehicle for excursions beyond the confines of the child's immediate world, providing vicarious experiences that might not be possible in real life. When used for this purpose, it is essential that the concepts and emotions expressed in the book are within the realm of the child's capacity to understand and assimilate.

It has been shown that books can be used to further positive human relations in the classroom. As a child identifies with literary characters, acceptance and respect for other human beings are fostered. By living through their experiences, learning about their work and play activities, and empathizing with their problems, fears and joys, a child is helped to relate to his fellows.

Literature can aid in the development of the child's creative imagination, his powers of sympathy, and his sense of humor. It simultaneously stimulates and helps satisfy the uniquely human need for aesthetic experience.

As children hear the variety of language used in books of different types -- here and now stories, folk tales, poetry, nonsense and fantasy, as well as informational books of many sorts -- vocabulary is extended and enriched. They learn statement patterns that are useful for logical reasoning as well as for communication.

Of course, literature cannot be separated from other facets of the program. While listening is itself an active art, it is also important for children to have many opportunities to respond, to discuss what has been read, and to relate this to their own experiences. A shared story provides a common base for group discussion as well as for spontaneous and planned dramatic interpretation. It may be the taking off point from which children relate stories of their own experiences and imaginings. It can inspire creative self-expression with a variety of media. From such opportunities develop

an increased sense of self, feelings of individuality and mastery, and, at the same time, a closeness to other people.

The Selection of Books for Young Children

What is a good book? Josephine Frank (1960, p.40) gives the following definition:

> "A good book for a child is one which provides the reader with a positive and wholesome experience of some kind, whether of emotional empathy, excitement and suspense, vicarious adventure, information, healthy laughter, or just plain pleasure. Furthermore, it should provide these experiences now, while it is being read, not five years later in retrospect."

What books appeal to children? Favorite books of young children are apt to depict familiar people, animals, objects and situations. Children wonder about many things, and books that answer their questions are fascinating to them. Often, the teacher finds clues in their spontaneous dramatic play, conversations and questions that can guide the selection of books. On occasion, children enjoy stories of the long ago or far away, provided they are able to identify emotionally with the characters.

Nursery rhymes are traditional literature for young children. Youngsters also like humorous stories and nonsense that is geared to their level. While some educators believe that only realistic stories should be presented, many teachers find that selected folk tales and fanciful stories

offer release and relaxation and so include these in their literature program. Every book need not be an educational device in the narrow sense of the word.

Poetry is appealing because of its cadence, musical quality and repetition. Children accept free verse, as well as rhyming poetry, with enjoyment and enthusiasm if presented that way by the teacher.

What are the criteria for selecting books? An appropriate book for young children has a text which:

... Fits the developmental level, experiential background, and interest of the listener in terms of content and complexity of treatment.

... Has substance, quality of content, and integrity.

... Offers a brief, lively treatment of a simple well-developed plot.

... Uses colorful language, rhythmic phrasing, and childlike repetition.

... Clearly distinguishes between reality and fantasy.

The physical makeup of the book is also important. Young children usually like large books, but they should not be so large as to be awkward when handled. A few oversize books as well as several smaller ones should be included for variety.

Book covers should be hard and washable. The paper needs to be heavy and strong with a dull surface. The binding should be stitched in such a way that the book will lie flat when opened. An illustrated cover adds appeal for the child.

The illustrations in a picture book should tell a story, arouse interest and stimulate the imagination. In choosing books for young children, look to see that illustrations are:

... Numerous, large and colorful.

... Filled with action.

... Clear and distinct, devoid of unessential details, shading and perspective.

... Well correlated with the text.

... Reflect the mood of what is written.

... Characterized by a quality of aesthetic excellence.

What assistance is available in selecting children's literature?

Often the teacher's problem is not so much one of securing books but of selecting the best from among the multitude of new books published each year.

A number of expert reviews and guides for their selection are available. Frequently public libraries publish annotated lists of outstanding books. Reliable reviews appear in the larger newspapers and in professional magazines. For a comprehensive listing of sources for general booklists as well as those on special subjects, write The Children's Book Council, Inc., 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York.

Such reviews and booklists help put the teacher on the right track, but in the final analysis the teacher must determine which books are most appropriate for individual children and/or the group. Since books must be read to young children, it is also essential that the teacher like the book. Unless he accepts and enjoys it, it is doubtful whether he can present it to the children in an interesting or convincing manner.

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Presenting the Story

To read or to tell? A well-told story often carries a greater impact than a story read from a book. The storyteller has more intimate contact with the children, can sense their response and better adapt to it. Furthermore, some stories are better told than read, particularly the old folk tales.

Reading the story also has advantages, however. Good literature is an example of well-chosen English. If there are beautiful illustrations, the children will want to enjoy both the story and the pictures. Some stories are better read. Who, for example, can improve on the genius of Dr. Seuss in "Horton Hatches the Egg"?

There is also the fact that the story read fosters the association between books and reading and thereby stimulates an interest in reading. The teacher may occasionally point out a particular word as she reads it, or refer to the general format of the book - its title, author, page numbers, and so on. By watching the teacher read, the child gradually comes to realize the relationship between the printed and the spoken word, as well as the sequence of left - to - right and top - to - bottom that will be essential when he himself starts to read.

Helpful Techniques. Whether the story is to be told or read, the following techniques are useful:

... See that the children are comfortably settled where they can see and hear easily, perhaps on a rug in a quiet corner of the room.

... Be thoroughly familiar with the content.

... Create a feeling that this is something special to be shared.

... Use a natural, pleasing voice, correct pronunciation, and clear enunciation.

... Read or tell the story with spontaneity, feeling and appreciation, but do not be overly dramatic.

... Use a variety of tones and speeds, pausing before the introduction of a new idea and whenever a character is about to speak.

... Avoid unnecessary comments but provide a brief explanation of unfamiliar words.

... Be tactful in dealing with interruptions by the children.

... Allow the children to chant familiar lines, to fill in with an obvious word or sound effect, and to suggest possible outcomes.

... Encourage youngsters to talk about the story if they desire, but refrain from lengthy evaluations and moralizing.

In addition to the above procedures, the storyteller should:

... Plan a good beginning and ending.

... Know the sequence of events.

... Memorize rhythmic jingles and characteristic phrases.

... Be familiar with each character and his name. (Sometimes the names of the listeners can be substituted to advantage).

... Use direct quotations when a character speaks.

... Use as much of the original language of the written story as possible.

The Library Center

The library center is an integral part of all rooms designed for groups of young children. Beside a book display rack, there may be a table - perhaps round or hexagonal in shape, and some comfortable chairs. A small rug, "sit-upons", or oversize floor pillows and one or two child-size rocking chairs make a cozy setting for browsing.

Books for the library center should be chosen carefully. Some books may stay for only a brief time, while others remain for longer periods or have a permanent place. Needless to say, worn or torn books should be removed.

In most programs, young children are free to use the library center whenever they choose. In addition, there may be a short period designated as "library time", during which children are encouraged to choose a book. A child may enjoy it alone or share the experience with a friend or two. When it is a favorite book, the youngster holding it often becomes the "storyteller", as others gather round to hear again the beloved tale.

Additional Ways of Stimulating Interest in Literature

... Illustrate stories as they are told - on the chalkboard, or with "magic marker", crayon, or brush at the easel.

... Project illustrations in the book onto a screen by means of an opaque projector.

... Use the flannel board occasionally. Let the children manipulate the flannel board figures. Later they will tell the story themselves in words and action.

... Let a puppet tell the story. Particularly with very young children who are unaccustomed to storytime, the puppet can be a captivating storyteller.

... Correlate science and seasonal displays, and personal experiences of children with books on the same theme.

... Encourage children to tell about their favorite books. Permit them to bring books from home to share in the library center.

... Encourage use of books as sources of information.

... Use films, slides and filmstrips that have been developed from some of the best children's books. Picture-cued recordings usually accompany these visual materials.

... Provide quality story records with musical backgrounds and/or sound effects.

... Tape a well-loved story, reading from the book and signaling with a bell or triangle when the child is to turn the page. Provide both the books and tape for use during the work period.

... Visit the public library. Perhaps the children's librarian will read or tell a story and explain about the books. Let the children help select the books to be borrowed.

The Step Beyond

Larrich (1960, P.148) believes it is the teacher's duty to encourage the child to take "the giant step from reading the literary creations of others to creating for himself". Some ways of doing this include:

... Use of literature as the stimulus for creative art. Children enjoy using paints, crayons, chalk, clay,

fingerpaints, etc., to interpret a story situation, a character or a mood. In this connection, it is important that the child is not pressured prematurely to express thoughts and ideas in representational form. Children in the pre-symbolic stage may wish to make the brush move like a flying bird rather than paint an illustration of the bird itself.

... Encouraging children to use rhythms, spontaneous dance and musical instruments to interpret the feeling and/or action of a poem or story.

... Writing down and reading to the child his own creative language, or taping his "story" and playing it back for his enjoyment.

... Capitalizing on creative dramatics as a means of re-creating literature. At times this may be a spontaneous re-enactment in the housekeeping or block center. Pantomine is a simple way to act out a story and often a good introduction to dramatization for young children. The teacher chooses a familiar nursery rhyme, poem, or story that has much action. While the teacher chants the verse or tells the story, perhaps joined by some of the children, others act it out. Later, as the children develop an ability to wait, to take turns, and can give one person a particular role, more complicated dramatizations can take place with the children providing direct conversation. Puppets are another wonderful stimulus for reproducing a story or creating an original version of a familiar theme.

Teachers of young children must be ever mindful that the creative process and its meaning to the child take precedence over any product which may result from such endeavor.

Parents as Allies

Children who come to school already instilled with a love of books probably are from homes where books are valued and where adults take the time to read aloud to their children. These parents will welcome suggestions from the teacher regarding books and ways to present them. They are eager to have their youngsters borrow books from both the school and public library.

More urgent, and perhaps more difficult, is the need to enlist the help of parents in non-reading homes. They need to be helped to realize the importance of literature in their children's lives. When their role is interpreted with understanding, rather than with rebuke or criticism, and when home-school partnership is stressed as a mutual effort to help the child, such parents are often responsive and willing to cooperate.

ADDITIONAL READING FOR TEACHERS

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